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AUTHOR Ratliff, Gerald Lee
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ABSTRACT

The creative use of dramatic performance in the senior high school and college introductory literature classroom involves students as participants rather than as spectators, and encourages recognition and understanding of poetic images, character relationships, symbols, and other literary principles essential to comprehend if students are to discern the author's thematic intent or to acquire a rewarding first taste of literature. A teacher can combine dramatics with literature by using the following techniques: (1) discussing the historical period of the selected literature, (2) encouraging students to visualize the period in terms of customs and manners through the use of music and slides, and (3) involving the students in simulating the attitudes of the characters as detailed in the literature and imitating the actions suggested by the story line. Other techniques include "staging" the literature by reading it in an environment similar to the story setting and using appropriate props. (AEA)

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'Dramatic Visualization: Theatrical Complimentaries In The Literature Classroom

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Gerald Lee Ratliff
Montclair State College
Upper Montclair, N. J.

Level:

Senior high school and college level introductory literature courses

Author's Comment:

It should come as little surprise to those engaged in the teaching of literature that the introductory classroom is quite figuratively littered with the broken bodies and spirits of countless numbers of young men and women who have experienced the agony and frustration of thematic analysis, position papers, oral reports, selected scenes or group readings assigned to highlight individual perceptions, underscore pertinent images or reinforce traditional interpretations of literary "masterpieces."

And, like Moliere's imaginary invalid, beginning students often respond to these elementary exercises by feigning a variety of sudden

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illnesses or by inventing a plethora of implausible excuses to avoid such assignments; and, many creative inventions not withstanding, surely miss a valuable opportunity to cure the supposed malady they imagine literature to breed.

Approach:

Part of the difficulty, no doubt, must lie with the instructor; who may often lack the performance skills needed to stimulate the student's waning interest in literature; or who may feel that classroom performance of literature is too whimsical or impractical to be taken seriousl especially when there are so many different periods of literature or genre to explicate in such a brief span of semester time.

Whether as inklings or as articulated beliefs, however, all of these initial reservations---by both the instructor and the student---furnish at one level or another the stance that each assumes in the classroom. And it is these initial reservations which have apparently inhibited the creative use of performance in any meaningful exploration of literature in the classroom environment.

Exercise:

What is needed, or so it would appear from a survey of the classroom "battleground," is further experimentation to discover the mutual compatibility between performance and literature; and the formulation of an instructional methodology which might serve as a blueprint for

the creative teaching of literature.

In order to understand more clearly the academic and theatrical interface between literature and performance as an instructional tool in the classroom, it will be useful for the instructor to begin the exercise with an informal discussion of the historical dimensions of the selected literature, including the social and political milieu, and to detail the pertinent images and themes of the period as they are reflected in the literature. Take special care to point out the thread of action in the literature, and discuss character relationships as they are suggested by the author.

Encourage the beginning student to "visualize" the historical period, in terms of customs and manners, and supplement the informative discussion with sessions devoted to period music or period projections that capture the spirit and the temper of the era being reviewed. (A discussion of Dante Alighieri's "Inferno," for example, might well include slides of the secular paintings of Masaccio, Uccello, or Gozzoli and the music of "Parsifal" to dramatically highlight the staggering profundities of Hell and the ineffable glories of Paradise which are exhibited in the medieval thought inherent in the literature.)

When confident that a solid foundation of understanding has been gained by the initial survey of the historical period, approach the "embodiment" of the literature in terms of the physical and vocal demands suggested by the author. This creative performance technique involves the beginning student entering the phenomenological world of the literature through personal association. In other words, the student simulates the attitude of the character as detailed in the litera-

ture and literally imitates the "actipns" suggested by the story line as he incorporates his own experiential world with the fictional world of the author's creation.

The emodiment principle of dramatic visualization is often made easier to comprehend by having the student indulge in overt physical action, as for example in re-creating the movements and gestures described in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"; by having the student recall vocally the moods of isolation and despair he may have felt at a specific moment as he interprets T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men"; or by having the student combine both the physical and vocal action in an interpretation of Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess."

Another creative principle to be considered is the "staging" of the literature. Used as an instructional method of visualizing the selected environment of the literature, the staging provides the beginning student with the locale necessary to understand the author's point of view, and is also helpful in suggesting the tone and mood of the literature.

Creative examples of staging literature to highlight author intent might include a reading of the poems of Sappho or a prologue from Aristophanes's "Lysistrata" in an amphitheatre; Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods On A Snowy Evening" on a snow-covered knoll or by a frozen lake; Edwin Markham's "The Man With The Hoe" in an abandoned field or deserted woodland; Thomas Gray's "Elegy" in a solemn graveyard/vacant lot; and Wallace Stevens' "Peter Quince At The Clavier" in a recital music hall with "witching chords" playing "pulse pizzicati" softly in the background.

A final ingredient useful in the dramatic visualization of literature is the filming or taping of the selection using suggestive props (a scroll for Polonius's advice to Laertes or a hand mirror for Milton's "On His Having Arrived At The Age Of Twenty-Three," for example) and costumes (a white butcher's apron for Carl Sandburg's "Chicago" or an American flag for Walt Whitman's "Thick-Sprinkled Bunting," for example.)

Here, the desired product is to achieve a careful balance between historical research and preparatory discussions, objective characterizations, performance exercises and creative staging. The student acts as a liaison between the author and the literature in the filming or taping by remaining faithful to the thematic intent, and highlights the historical perspective by incorporating the dress and habits suggested by the literature in the performance; and the instructor acts as both director and critic by framing the sequences and actions included in the performance so that the inherently cinematic nature of the literature is revealed.

Summation:

The creative use of theatrical complimentaries in the dramatic visualization of literature emphatically involves beginning students as participators, not as spectators; and has both academic and creative appeal that encourages recognition and understanding of poetic images, character relationships, symbols, prosodies or any other literary prin-

ciple which is essential to comprehend if the beginning student is to discern the author's thematic intent; or if the student is to acquire a first "taste" of literature that is exciting and rewarding.

The mutual compatibility of dramatic visualization and the teaching of literature should be seen clearly as one possible answer to the question of how to motivate unresponsive students or to cultivate an initial appreciation of literature, and the use of theatrical complimentaries and film or taping represent the most expressive medium of instruction and entertainment with which most young men and women of this academic generation are familiar. When used creatively, the principle of dramatic visualization can only serve to reinforce already held student views that to "see" literature is more exciting and more challenging than to "read" literature.